

Plain English Summary

Pembrolizumab for treating early triple-negative breast cancer

What does the guidance say?

Pembrolizumab is not recommended for government subsidy as neoadjuvant or adjuvant treatment for patients with early triple-negative breast cancer. It is claimable under MediShield Life.

What is triple-negative breast cancer?

Breast cancer occurs when abnormal cells grow uncontrollably in the ducts or lobes of the breast and spread into the surrounding breast tissue. When cancer is found only in the breast or nearby lymph nodes and has not spread to other parts of the body, this is known as early breast cancer.

The first treatment for breast cancer is often surgery to remove it. Some patients may have drug treatments such as chemotherapy or hormone therapy before surgery to help shrink the cancer and make it easier to remove. This is called neoadjuvant treatment. After surgery, patients may need to take other treatments to destroy any remaining cancer cells and reduce the risk of the breast cancer coming back. This type of treatment given after surgery is known as adjuvant therapy.

For some breast cancer cells, proteins (receptors) may be present on the surface which encourages the cancer cells to divide and grow. These proteins are called ER (estrogen receptor), PR (progesterone receptor) and HER2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor 2). If diagnostic tests show that cancer cells do not have high levels of these three proteins, this is known as triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC), which can be more aggressive than other types of breast cancer.

What is pembrolizumab?

Pembrolizumab belongs to a group of medicines called PD-1/PD-L1 checkpoint inhibitors. It is a type of cancer treatment called immunotherapy that helps the immune system find and kill cancer cells.

It is given as a slow drip into a vein (intravenously) in combination with chemotherapy as a neoadjuvant treatment before surgery to help shrink the cancer. After surgery, doctors will prescribe pembrolizumab (on its own) as an adjuvant treatment to destroy any remaining cancer cells.

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Why was it not recommended for subsidy?

ACE evaluates how well a treatment works in relation to how much it costs compared to other treatments. Pembrolizumab was not recommended for subsidy for early triple-negative breast cancer because its benefits do not justify its cost. If you need pembrolizumab for this condition, you can speak to a medical social worker to find out if there is other financial assistance available to help with the cost of treatment.

Is this the right treatment for me?

Your doctor may recommend you have pembrolizumab for early triple-negative breast cancer. Your doctor should give you clear information, listen to your views and concerns, and talk to you about your treatment options.

Some of the questions you may want to ask your doctor when making decisions about your care are:

- How will the treatment affect my day-to-day activities?
- How well does it work compared to other treatments?
- What are the side effects and risks of treatment, and how likely are they?
- How much does the treatment cost?
- How long will I need to be on the treatment for?
- What happens if the treatment stops working?
- What happens if I do not want to have treatment?

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 Agency for Care Effectiveness - ACE

 Agency for Care Effectiveness (ACE)

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